

Comments on Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means,
House of Representatives

Submitted on behalf of the

Alliance for Children and Families by

President and CEO Susan N. Dreyfus

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the Protect our Kids Act, an important piece of legislation that will promote the safety of our nation's children.

I represent the Alliance for Children and Families, a national organization dedicated to achieving a vision of a healthy society and strong communities for all children, adults, and families. The Alliance works for transformational change by representing and supporting hundreds of nonprofit human serving organizations located in North America to translate knowledge into best practices that improve their communities. Working with and through its member network, the Alliance strives to achieve high impact by reducing the number of people living in poverty; increasing the number of people with opportunities to live safe and healthy lives; and increasing the number of people on pathways to educational and employment success. Our members have significant experience in child welfare with many of them providing the case management function in partnership with the public sector. We represent a significant force in the nonprofit human-serving sector. Collectively, our network contributes more than \$14.8 billion to local, state, and national economies, operate in 2,700 locations and serve more than 8,000 communities.

I have had responsibility for the public child welfare systems in the States of Wisconsin and Washington, working for both Republican and Democratic Governors, in addition to my experience in the non profit sector. I have helped shape major reform efforts in systems under class action litigation and have helped shape public policy which aligns with our child and family centered values and goals to ensure that every child who comes to the attention of the public child welfare system is safe and able to live their lives with permanency and enhanced well-being.

Most recently, I served as the secretary of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, where I had responsibility for child welfare, Medicaid, juvenile justice, aging and long term care, developmental disabilities, eligibility and TANF, mental health, and substance abuse. At a time of significant reductions in our budget, we led significant transformative change by focusing on impact, partnerships and seizing the integration across our systems that often sit in what I respectfully call, "cylinders of excellence".

It was a true honor to serve Washington Governor Christine Gregoire from 2009-2012. During my tenure, we successfully reduced child maltreatment rates by focusing on safety, doing an in-depth analysis of our fatalities and by using predictive analytics to determine which children were at highest risk. Through intense collaboration we arrived at new ways to identify risk and implement many effective strategies. For example, we instituted a policy of always screening children under two years of age, looking more closely at repeat referrals within a household regardless of screening decisions, and screening in any reports made by medical professionals.

A national commission, such as that created by the Protect our Kids Act, would serve an important function in gathering the best, most innovative solutions from both the public and non-profit sectors and recommending strategies that improve child safety and reduce the tragedy of child fatalities

In considering innovative solutions, the commission should include representation of the non profit child welfare agencies and their significant child welfare experience. States are increasingly looking to their private partners to carry out child welfare functions including, case management, and it is these private agencies that are leveraging both federal and private funds and creative community partnerships to create innovative solutions. Without private agency input, a large piece of the knowledge and experience needed by the Commission would be missing.

My experience has taught me that while our first inclination is to always want to quickly focus on improving results for children, we must first start with clear legislative policy on what we are to ultimately achieve and the principles through which we are to align and constantly improve the entire system beginning with intake. I would like to share 4 themes that I believe need to be included if the Commission is to be successful in achieving its goals.

Clear and Aligned Policy Creates True Reform

Among states, the policy often is fractured by numerous reform efforts over many years that attempt to fix only parts of the system from the outside/in. This leads to great confusion and inconsistency in performance. I believe that the recent Information Memorandum issued by the Administration for Children and Families is the first clear policy direction from the federal government in child welfare during my 20 years of experience. It states clearly what the system is to achieve, which is to promote the social, physical, and emotional well-being for children receiving child welfare services and to improve the behavioral, physical, and social, emotional outcomes for children who have experienced abuse and or neglect.

It is through this lens I suggest any review of the country's vision and direction be undertaken. One of the key principles should be a strong policy statement on the system's mission: to meet the unique needs of every child, every time, within the context of their emotional and physical safety. This is not just an ultimate outcome, but must be experienced by a child every day they are under the responsibility of the child welfare agency.

A Focus on Impact

I believe that a key to successful child welfare systems is the vision, transparency and leadership of the public sector agency in inviting the community, families, other state agencies, philanthropy, the courts and all stakeholders to actively participate and share accountability for the success of the system. Reforms from the top down may make for short term gains, but they do not bring long term and impactful change. As lawmakers, you can ensure that the other public sector agencies responsible for — education, mental health, substance abuse, developmental disabilities, TANF, Juvenile Justice, courts and law enforcement— are clear on their responsibilities to carry out your clearly articulated child welfare policy.

Powerful use of Data Analytics

To illustrate how private agencies are key to child safety, I would like to provide for you a vivid example of how Alliance members are using data and technology.

Data analytics is our next frontier in child welfare. If we use our data not to simply find out too late what is not working but we use it to help us with our daily work and decisions, to help us understand what is working and we use the data to continuously ask the "why" questions, we can not only make better decisions for each child but constantly be improving our policy, practice and results.

Some of our member agencies in Florida have partnered with software company Mindshare to develop a system using predictive analytics to identify high risk children and families in order to target interventions to keep children safe. The results have been promising. Caseworkers receive real time updates that allow them to intervene before a situation becomes unsafe for the children.

By harnessing the power of technology they are able to transform massive amounts of data into useable information. The system integrates with the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and incorporates information from school districts, law enforcement, the health care agency and others. Using data from multiple sources has allowed agencies to identify children at risk even before they come to the attention of the child protection system.

In designing the system, they studied every child death in the state, and from there were able to create models that detect behavioral patterns related to risk. The process takes a great deal of subject matter expertise and they are continually refining and updating their rules to make it more accurate.

The use of data analytics in Florida points to a new direction in early detection and intervention, but barriers to full implementation remain. For example, confidentiality policies sometimes hinder the flow of information. And not all data is automated. For example, information from court records must be extracted and entered manually. In addition, agencies cannot claim federal administrative dollars to operate the system. These barriers represent the kind of issues that a national commission could address in their recommendations to Congress.

Sustainable Reforms Must be Aligned Across Systems

The constant churn of child welfare reform efforts seems to be never ending, and that is because we keep trying to fix the system from the outside in, one technical fix at a time. What is needed is to step back and ensure we have a clear and articulated policy and set of principles that are aligned across multiple systems and shared by the community. Then, using the power of data analytics, science, and creation of true partnerships that incorporate authentic voices of all involved, we will be able to implement sustainable solutions. I am convinced that child maltreatment is a major public health issue in America today, and that the Protect our Kids Act is an important step to reaching a solution.

In closing, the public agency responsible for child protection is but one part of the child welfare system. The safety and well-being of the nation's children are a shared and very serious responsibility, requiring a public child protection agency able to bring the many other parts of the system to the table in shared responsibility for our children. The national commission created by the Protect our Kids Act is an important step in that direction.

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